

Shakespearean gravitas in political satire: British actor Ian Richardson dead at 72

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15 February 2007

Even actors of great versatility and range are sometimes remembered for one or two roles. Ian Richardson, who has died suddenly aged 72, is a case in point.

One of the finest classical actors of his generation, he acquired huge popularity through the television series *House of Cards* (1990) and its two sequels (*To Play The King* [1993] and *The Final Cut* [1995]). His portrayal of the manipulative MP Francis Urquhart, scheming and murderous in his designs on power, struck a chord with a population sick of Thatcherism and its legacy. Though he later found the success of this portrayal something of a burden, it says a great deal for his qualities as an actor that it was so compelling.

Ian Richardson was born in Edinburgh in 1934, where his father worked for a biscuit company. Having enjoyed primary school, he said he preferred to forget his time at Tynecastle High. "I don't think they had a clue what to do with me," he told an interviewer. With his father away at war, his mother encouraged him to join a local amateur dramatics company, where he first began to show promise. His father was a strict Presbyterian, and Richardson struggled to convince his parents that acting was a sensible profession.

He was serious about performance from the outset. He spent much of his National Service (conscription) working as a continuity announcer for Forces Radio in Libya. Here he began to develop the vocal precision that would mark his professional performances.

He found returning to Edinburgh difficult, once commenting, "You were alright in Edinburgh so long as you stayed within the bounds of your own social status."

He auditioned successfully for the College of Dramatic Art in Glasgow. Asked why he wanted to become an actor, he replied, "I can conceive of no other career I could possibly exist in."

At the College of Dramatic Art, where he won the James Bridie Gold Medal in 1957, Richardson worked further on his voice. He recalled the principal telling him that "by no stretch of the imagination" would he ever be a matinee idol: "You're not muscular, you're not particularly tall and you're not particularly handsome. But you do have a remarkably fine voice. And, if you have a fine voice, you can always persuade people that you are tall, muscular and handsome."

The result of the work he did to make his vocal sounds "as impressive as possible" was a voice of clarity and precision.

Like John Gielgud, Richardson had a supreme control over rhythm, inflection and tone that allowed him to explore a huge range of parts and styles. Although he did not often work in the field, he enjoyed a number of successes in musical theatre, for example.

This was a period when repertory companies still exposed young actors to the classics. From Glasgow, Richardson joined one of the

country's most prestigious companies, the Birmingham Rep under Barry Jackson, where he replaced Albert Finney.

His two seasons at Birmingham brought him plaudits as he began to tackle major classical roles, including playing Hamlet at just 24. The talents that he brought to his most celebrated work were already in evidence: the critic J.C. Trewin described his Hamlet as a "sad-eyed figure of settled melancholy...who could suggest heartbreak in an inflection, a twist of the lip."

He also responded well to huge challenges. "If you have been on stage playing Hamlet at 24," he said later, "that experience is so traumatic and scary that nothing you encounter again can ever equal it." He would use similar words about playing Shakespeare's Coriolanus and Richard III, saying that the experience had given him "tremendous self-confidence."

From Birmingham he was taken on as part of the company that Peter Hall was developing at Stratford-upon-Avon. The intention was to create a troupe that could develop a coherent and recognisable style through working together as an ensemble. Richardson, one of Hall's first contracted players in 1960, was a founder member of what became the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) the following year.

He was with the RSC for 15 years. Having made his debut as Aragon, a small part, in *The Merchant of Venice*, he quickly became one of the leading players of the company. Within two years, he was playing Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* under Hall's direction. In 1964, he appeared as Edmund in Peter Brook's touring production of *King Lear*.

His earliest film credits date from this period, and give some indication of the quality of actors emerging from the repertory scene. In 1963, he played Le Beau in a television adaptation of *As You Like It*, alongside Vanessa Redgrave, Patrick Allen and Patrick Wymark. The following year, his performance as Antipholus of Ephesus in *The Comedy of Errors* was also broadcast. Around him were performers of the calibre of Diana Rigg, Janet Suzman and Alec McCowen. In 1968, he played Oberon on film for Hall, with David Warner, Judi Dench, Ian Holm and (in her second film) Helen Mirren. Mirren, dedicating her recent BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) award for *The Queen* to Richardson, praised his generosity in sharing his craft.

He remained ambitious about what he wanted to achieve in classical theatre. In 1964, playing the Herald in Brook's groundbreaking production of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, he told the critic Michael Billington that he was feeling somewhat overlooked at the RSC. He was at the beginning, though, of what Hall has described as "an extraordinary range" of parts.

When *Marat/Sade* transferred to Broadway, Richardson played

Marat, a part he reprised in Brook's flawed but fascinating attempt to film the production in 1967. He played a succession of great Shakespearean parts: Coriolanus (1967), Cassius in *Julius Caesar* (1968), Pericles (1969) and Angelo in *Measure for Measure* (1970). If he was already established as the RSC's leading player, the early 1970s cemented that reputation, with critically acclaimed performances as Prospero in *The Tempest*, Berowne in *Love's Labours Lost*, Iachimo in *Cymbeline* and Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Two performances stand out in terms of quality and also the direction that Richardson would take. In 1973 he and Richard Pasco alternated the parts of Richard and Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, widely regarded as one of the most outstanding recent achievements of English classical theatre. Critics widely praised Richardson, Pasco, and director John Barton for their redefining of the play.

Richardson, though, was already feeling that he had accomplished what he had wanted in classical theatre. He made no hasty moves from the RSC, but finished his time there with an outstanding performance as Richard III. He was to use the sardonic strength from this part to inform his most successful television work.

Having done some musical theatre on Broadway, Richardson found himself out of work for a period. He suffered a nervous breakdown, and spent three weeks in a nursing home. Although he never abandoned the theatre or the classics (he gave a brilliant performance as Sir Epicure Mammon in Jonson's *The Alchemist* just last year), he eventually found more work in film and, particularly, television.

Having been part of a generation of classical actors who were able to work within a theatre company system, Richardson now found himself breaking into television at a time when serious high-quality drama was being produced. His breakthrough came in 1979 with *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, based on John Le Carré's novel. Able to develop a character over the course of a series, Richardson gave a brilliant performance as Bill Haydon. He praised Alec Guinness, from whom he said he learnt "how to act for the camera."

Over the next 10 years, he performed in a wide variety of work. This was a period when film and television producers were increasingly dealing with the Cold War and the crises of contemporary politics. Richardson appeared as Anthony Blunt, and had parts in Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* and Terry Gilliam's dystopian fantasy *Brazil*. He also appeared in adaptations of plays, notably Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* and Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy*.

In 1990, he appeared for the first time as Francis Urquhart in *House of Cards*. He brought to the part an entire repertoire of classical techniques, explicitly modelling his performance on Richard III. In the calculated evasion ("You may very well think that: I couldn't possibly comment"), the cruel intelligence and humour, the asides direct to camera, Richardson brought the gravitas of a Shakespearean performance to political satire.

Watching a recent repeat, his performance is still compelling and fresh. Richardson was also well served by Andrew Davies's screenplay. That it was able to capture the public imagination in the way that it did owes a great deal to Richardson's ability to make real the Byzantine machinations of the character.

Crucially, the version of reality being played out on television struck a chord in the popular imagination because it was what people really thought of the Tories. *House of Cards* (and *To Play The King* and *The Final Cut*) were broadcast during a protracted period of crisis for the Conservative government.

As *House of Cards* first aired, the Tory party was entering a period

of internal conflict. Margaret Thatcher was removed from Downing Street. (The first episode posed the possibility of an end to the era of Thatcherism just before it happened.) A leadership contest ensued. As the party's new leader John Major did his utmost to distance himself from Thatcherism by appealing to a supposed "compassionate conservatism," Francis Urquhart was manoeuvring in the most brutal way against his political opponents. As Major's campaign against sleaze ran aground on the realities of his party, Urquhart was lying, cheating, blackmailing and murdering his way towards the highest office in the land.

The longer the Tories' crisis unfolded, in fact, the more Urquhart's story confirmed popular impressions. It was, perhaps, more "real" than reality itself, or at least far truer than the version of the Tories presented to the public by Conservative central office's packaging of Major.

As one of the best television responses to the Thatcher/Major period, *House of Cards* perfectly coincided with mounting popular hostility. Finding a brilliant interpreter in Richardson, Urquhart therefore became the truly successful villain/anti-hero.

It was, in fact, enriched by inside information. *House of Cards* was adapted from a novel by Michael Dobbs, who had been a reporter in Washington during Watergate and later served as Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party. Dobbs describes Major's leadership campaign team stopping work to watch the programme.

Richardson found himself somewhat limited by his success as Urquhart. He never stopped working, and his performances remained illuminated by the same qualities, but, as he said, that role "clung to me rather heavily. The parts that came my way were always a relation of Francis Urquhart."

This is, perhaps, unsurprising, and the brilliance of Richardson's performance is not diminished by it. The remarkable qualities he was able to bring to that role had been developed in his earlier theatrical work, associated with an extraordinary chapter in the history of the British stage.



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